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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: (ii) women's human rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly

Statement submitted by the International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The International Council of Women, which represents millions of women across the world, deems it a privilege to be partners with the United Nations and with the Commission on the Status of Women, in the determination to promote the well-being of women and their families.

Prevention of violence against women, human rights of women, the girl child, all are aspects of the one and the same issue — how are women perceived in the environments in which they live? Only too often, violence against women operates as a means to maintain and reinforce women's subordination.

Violence against women cannot be dealt with in isolation, but should be looked at in a holistic, integrated way, taking into consideration all factors which form the determinants of the status of women and those of the rights of human beings.

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The leading modern instrument on women's equal rights derived from the Universal Declaration, is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women adopted in 1979 — which require respect for, and observance of human rights of women.

Member States assured the legal duty to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in civil, political, economic, social and cultural areas including health care and family planning, and to do so without delay.

But, the modern era of rights applied to women's well-being, began not in the past 27 years; it began with the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, and in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights condemned discrimination on the grounds of sex.

How much longer, then will we talk about the problems which still face us in this century?

We recognize that women have acquired many rights. Much of the credit for achieving these rights goes to the United Nations and its conferences.

However, at the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women and the General Assembly that followed, the 12 critical areas of concern in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action were reviewed. What did the data show?

It showed that:

- Violence against women ranked as high as cancer for killing and incapacitating women of childbearing age
- At least 20 per cent of women have been physically or sexually assaulted
- Out of close to 900 million illiterates in the world, two thirds are women
- Of the 1.3 billion poor, 70 per cent are women
- 120 million women have undergone female genital mutilation and 2 million women are at risk of undergoing this practice, annually
- 2 million girls aged 5-15 are trafficked, sold or coerced into the commercial sex market each year

And the list is long.

NGOs have done well in raising awareness of issues and needs — the need to empower women and the need to erase gender disparities throughout the world.

We have not succeeded well enough in developing the appropriate structures and mechanisms to achieve the goals.

International human rights relevant to women's well-being are worth nothing in countries where there are no enforceable measures to make them effective.

What is lacking in our joint efforts is Governments' accountability to the United Nations.

The United Nations has a dual role to play:

1. To be the facilitator of the multisectoral, multifaceted efforts for change, and
2. To Monitor and control the outcomes.

Governments must prove to the United Nations that their policies in all developmental processes are based on the gender perspective, that they have legislated laws to safeguard women's rights, that they implemented these laws and that legal action is being taken against those who violate these laws.

Among its manifold roles, the United Nations should publish an annual report on its findings, to be circulated to all Member States and international NGOs.

Measuring the prevalence of violence is difficult, to a great extent because of underreporting — underreporting by the victims of violence because of the trauma, and due to shame, due to guilt feelings, due to fear of reprisal and punishment, and fear of stigma. In many societies, the victims of violence are punished as if they were to blame.

In spite of underreporting, there is sufficient evidence and data to be able to say that violence in general and violence against women at all ages in one form or another has become a pandemic, in all countries and in all societies.

The facts are that each year thousands of women throughout the world are tricked, forced, coerced into slavery and forced to work as prostitutes. Tens of millions of children have been forced to work in the sex market and each year 2 million additional girls aged 5-15 are brought into the sex market and kept there under violent inhuman conditions.

Trafficking in women is not only a form of human rights abuse, it should be declared an international crime, a criminal offense, not only in a few countries, but in all countries. The United Nations can take the initiative to break the networks in trafficking and establish appropriate mechanisms to penalize offenders. Governments that are Member States ought to prove to the United Nations that they have established such legislation and laws that are effective against trafficking, and that these laws have been implemented in practice.

Concomitantly with these actions, we have to think of the future.

In this regard, you, the Commission on the Status of Women and we, the NGOs together, must give priority to prevention — prevention of violence. To be effective, we have to begin with the young at a very early age — in crèches, in kindergartens, in schools, in high schools, vocational schools, community centres, the workplaces, everywhere, at all levels of civil societies — learn how to communicate, how to conduct a dialogue rather than engage in arguments, how to listen to one another, even if one does not agree, learn to respect one another, man or woman. If girls and boys are treated equally within the family, this is the best equal rights education that boys can receive as they grow up to be men, in their individual life, as in public life when they assume decision and policy-making positions.

When boys and girls see an example of mutual respect between their parents, they will act accordingly when they have spouses.

If boys and girls, at all levels of the educational system and in informal educational programmes will learn that they are not the same, they have special needs, but they have the same human rights, they might grow up to exercise mutual respect, to be tolerant to differences, to listen, to conduct dialogues and refrain from aggression and violence.

If we succeed in education, perhaps in the future there will not be the need to continue to talk about violence against women, trafficking in women, equality, equity and human rights.

We should involve the young in programmes for the young, begin with the smallest unit of society — the family, the rights and responsibilities of each member of the family, mutual respect between spouses, parents and children and children and grandparents.

The promotion of the status of women and equality between men and women, cannot be achieved by treating women and men identically.

Identical treatment ignores women's and men's different social realities and gender roles.

When policy makers introduce measures to address socio-economic issues, humanitarian issues, health, the elderly, the handicapped, etc., they often fail to take account of the differences resulting from gender.

Therefore, in all educational programmes, the proposed standard of equality, based on a reconsideration and re-conceptualization of "equality" from a gender perspective, should be taken into consideration.

This perspective, takes into consideration the differences between women and men, their roles and responsibilities, in policy analysis, evaluation, planning and decision-making.

One cannot ignore the role of the media in influencing attitudes, behaviours and perceptions. How are women portrayed in the media and advertisement if not as a sex object? Where do youngsters see violence if not on television and movies? Yes, "the right to choose" is a fine slogan, but are young minds and emotions mature enough to be able to choose?

The Commission on the Status of Women is to be commended for placing the issue of women's access to the media on the agenda at this session. It may also wish to study further the effect on young people of violence in the media and on the Internet.

In conclusion, we call upon all NGOs present here to join the International Council of Women and together to fight the vice of trafficking in women, children and adolescents and that of violence whether it is directed against children, adolescents, adults or the elderly.

And last, we must not forget humanism and the spiritual dimension.

Each nation, each people, must identify those values in its respective culture and tradition that can be transmitted to the young in order that them may grow up to be good human beings.